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THE BEGINNINGS
OF
MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

The Beginnings
of
Modern American Poetry

by
A. E. MORGAN

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THE BEGINNINGS OF MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

THE New England culture which burgeoned in the middle of the nineteenth century was a transatlantic growth from the scions of Old England. Although grafted on to American plants and cultivated on American soil they produced flowers and fruit scarcely distinguishable from the British produce. Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, Emerson and Poe might have flourished under the insular skies of England.

The gulf which divided the old American culture from the new was created by the Civil War. Thereafter America became America, conscious as never before of her own soul. Out of the clangour of those raging days we hear for the first time the authentic note of American poetry: Walt Whitman sings of American citizenship in arms as he had already sung of the vast work which men were undertaking to master the great spaces and the rich resources which made that huge continent. Lover of man's physical strength and apostle of democracy, he shouted his faith into the winds that blew across the thousands of American miles and bore the longings and the lust of the teeming millions of this growing people.

With a poetic faith rooted in the Wordsworthian philosophy that it is the prime duty of the poet to see, to appreciate and to image forth the life of simple men and women, Whitman sings,

A song for occupations!
In the labour of engines and trades and the
labour of fields I find the developments,
And find the eternal meanings.

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He takes the whole of life within his purview. He is not content to sing of the obvious prettiness of sunshine and flowers and of the romance of rosy love. In Wordsworth's phrase he believed that there is for the poet "no necessity to trick out or to elevate nature," but that "Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science. The objects of the Poet's thoughts are everywhere. If the labours of men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at present: he will be ready to follow the steps of the man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself."¹

The revolution which in those words Wordsworth prophesied in 1800 happened. But English poets did not walk in step with men of science, although the well-meaning Ebenezer Elliott tried to keep pace. It was left for this noisy American to make the first real attempt. He saw that if he was to be true to the poet's calling he must do more than depict: he must carry sensation into the midst of the objects of this new mechanical world, and he must find the eternal meanings. His poetry is in fact an attempt to do this in terms of the sweat and toil and physical violence which the nineteenth-century conquest of America demanded. He gloried in the freedom to exercise the primitive human forces which he found in America and he glorified raw life untrammelled by the inhibiting sophistication of Mayfair or Massachusetts. Thoreau had gone native, but what a genteel savagery was his in contrast to the rocky, sunburnt, hairy

¹ *Lyrical Ballads*, Preface to 1800 ed.

lustihood of Whitman. Concord was Arcadia to the rough surging America in which hewers and labourers and mechanics were breeding many children and waging war with the untamed might and untapped wealth of the plains and mountains stretching away to the Pacific.

From the same source two other men were drawing inspiration. Bret Harte and Mark Twain reflected in less serious mood the humour and the adventure of this new world. With these three men American literature won independence. But it continued to hug its chains, and literary production in America still reflected English lights.

The latter part of the century was an era of terrific internal struggle in America. Industrialism spread apace, materialism was intensified and ugliness spread like a tetter over this lately unblemished continent. "From 1866 to 1880 the United States was in a chaotic and purely materialistic condition; it was full of political scandals, panics, frauds, malfeasance in high places. The moral fiber was flabby; the country was apathetic, corrupt, and contented."¹ From this chaos emerged a sense of national consciousness. The formal processes of Americanization had not been developed, but there grew up a feeling that what America needed was a personality, different from but containing the multifarious elements which had been poured into her crucible.

This Whitman had felt ardently, but the poets succeeding him turned away from the raw humanity they saw around them. Hovey and Bliss Carman in the 'nineties are inspired by the lustiness of Whitman, but like Henley in England they escape full of energy in an access of high vitality and natural *joie de vivre*. Others turn their back

¹ Untermeyer, L., *Modern American Poetry*, xix.

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even more deliberately on the new America of work and noise. They would return to nature in Wordsworthian mood and seek out in the older places of more settled peace the human worth to which they can anchor their poetic craft. Once safe from the storm they can inveigh against the materialism, the exploitation and the cheapness which are overcoming their America, just as John Davidson was doing in England.

In *The Man with the Hoe* Edwin Markham makes his prophetic comment on it all. As he looks on Millet's famous picture of the eternal labourer he sees the tragedy of man's spirit and body warped and wearied by a burden greater than should be borne. He sees the pathetic patience which endures exploitation, and he sees what man might be if given nourishment and scope for the development of all his powers.

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world.

And Markham asks the question which other poets are going to ask as they contemplate the drudge of modern machinery, alike in this respect to the drudge of all ages:

Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?

William Vaughn Moody, who died young in 1910, had sounded the same note. In *Gloucester Moors* he protested against the exploitation of people in the interests of getting wealth and the consequent enslavement of spirit. Earth is like a beautiful ship, such ships as he saw riding the Atlantic from his New England coast; but whither is she going?

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I watched when her captains passed :
She were better captainless.
Men in the cabin, before the mast,
But some were reckless and some aghast,
And some sat gorged at mess.

In *The Brute* he makes direct onslaught against the devouring monster of machinery which crams its maw with humanity. The spirit has become dominated; industrialism is a greedy destroyer of beautiful life. Yet it is a magnificent brute, this vastly powerful machine. So far he is in step with William Morris, but he goes further. At this point Morris turned back and hankered wistfully after the pristine beauty of a world which never was, but at any rate which had no mechanization of industry. Moody, on the other hand, looks forward. While conscious of the dirt and degradation of the new mechanical age he sees in the machine the potentialities of a richer, more beautiful life, where it becomes the wisely controlled servant of man, and is no longer his greedy tyrant. For "the Brute must bring the good time on." He must be harnessed for beneficent ends. He must even be the agent for destroying the evil he created :

He must make the temples clean for the gods to come again,
And lift the lordly cities under skies without a stain.

At last man will be rightly proud of his servant and claim
God's blessing on him as a good and faithful servant :

Then the Lord will heed their saying, and the
Brute come to his own,
'Twixt the Lion and the Eagle, by the armpost
of the Throne.

In 1912 the new movement in poetry was heralded by the birth of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. It unified the attempts of a number of men who were working each in

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his own way towards a new expression. It was remarkably many-sided, and therein lay its strength. In a wide sense these pioneers were realists. They were in touch with common experience, and abandoning literary, poetic form as such aimed, like Wordsworth and Coleridge in *Lyrical Ballads*, at speaking of men to men.

The contributors to the new movement were not in all cases new poets. E. A. Robinson as early as 1897 had published in *Children of the Light* veracious, clear-cut etchings of real types. With economy of phrase and accuracy of form he had depicted life as he saw it. It was truth he sought to follow, even "the racked and shrieking hideousness of Truth," as he asserts in *Zola*. He sees as a companion sin to untruth the negative crime of indifference. He sees a beautiful world of man moving to destruction because its master neglects beauty: soon the soul will have perished from it because "the music failed."

The Dead Village

Here there is death. But even here, they say,
Here where the dull sun shines this afternoon
As desolate as ever the dead moon
Did glimmer on dead Sardis, men were gay;
And there were little children here to play,
With small soft hands that once did keep in tune
The strings that stretch from heaven, till too soon
The change came, and the music passed away.

Now there is nothing but the ghost of things,—
No life, no love, no children, and no men;
And over the forgotten place there clings
The strange and unrememberable light
That is in dreams. The music failed, and then
God frowned, and shut this village from his sight.

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Robinson was no cynic and no pessimist, but a prophet seeing the danger, and also the possibility of salvation. He had an ultimate belief in human potentialities, but he feared that man might go wrong. His cure is a stiff dose of truth. Like Thomas Hardy, he believed in the purifying, sanative quality of bitter honesty. If he admits optimism it is only on the basis of strict veracity. Like Hardy he held

that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst.

Edgar Lee Masters was possessed by a similar desire to tear away the trimmings of flattering romance where it hides the stern features of truth. He had written a certain amount of undistinguished verse when in 1915 he startled his readers with *Spoon River Anthology*. This grim collection is a series of epitaphs, self-spoken from the grave by those they commemorate and describe. He depicts the inmost life of a mid-western community with unflinching honesty. The hypocrisy and the fair face are stripped from the mediocrity of Main Street. High reputations are left naked; crime is shown to have resided where honour seemed to reign. It is certainly a cynical picture of life, but its honesty cannot be denied. In *Richard Bone* he defends this ruthless veracity and attacks the untruthfulness of conventional art. Occasionally he restores dishonoured worth to its deserved place, or shows a glimpse of loving-kindness, as in Elmer Karr, the boy murderer, who found help and sympathy when he had served his term in gaol. But on the whole we are left with a sour taste. From Thomas Hardy the awful truth is dragged with agony; but with Masters we have the feeling that he finds perverted pleasure in playing the moral peeping-tom. It is horrible, but is it not

rather fun to see respectability in its small clothes, or in none at all? Such a process may clear and quicken the vision, but it does not expand the spirit. Shakespeare shows us human nature to its vilest and cruellest depths, but the horror past we are left warmer and richer of soul. Masters leaves us with teeth set on edge, and chattering. It is better for an Englishman to quote an American judgement that "Beneath its surface tales and dramas, its condensation of grocery-store gossip, *Spoon River Anthology* is a great part of America in microcosm."¹ It is not an edifying picture. It is a cleansing dose maybe, but it is astringent. The greatest art expands the spirit, but this at most clears our vision: it gives us no grand vista on which to let it range.

All these poets were men who, however widely they may have known life, were sprung from a comfortable and cultured class. Robert Frost was nearer to the rawness of American life. Born in California, but bred in New England, he was in touch with the soil. He was not a Boston gentleman, but a young man of real Yankee farmer stock. Finding college life uncongenial he became a manual worker, and was employed in the cotton mills. For many years he wrote verse unsuccessfully. Then he moved to Cambridge and studied at Harvard for two years, but again he found university life unsatisfying and took to teaching. For the first twelve years of the century he lived a hard and scanty life as a New Hampshire farmer, until in 1912 he came to England with his wife and family. Here he came into intimate contact with Lascelles Abercrombie and Wilfrid Gibson. These two neo-Wordsworthians, particularly Gibson, who were then making a new poetry of common life, acted as a stimulus to Frost's art and he produced *A Boy's Will*, which was

¹ Untermeyer, *Modern American Poetry*, xxxiii.

published in England in 1913. This was followed in 1914 by *North of Boston*, and in the next year he returned to America, a great man, and for three years he was a professor at Amherst College, and later settled down in Vermont as a farmer once again. Frost seemed to find most satisfaction in alternating between life on the land and in a professorial chair and whether or not it is good for a farmer to be a professor, it is certainly good for a professor of poetry to be a farmer.

Frost claimed with justice that *North of Boston* was a book of the people. He, like Gibson of much of his work, might fairly say, as Wordsworth said of *Lyrical Ballads*, that

The principal object of these Poems was to choose incidents and situations of common life . . . to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them . . . the primary laws of our nature. . . . Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.¹

That is the *locus classicus* of the Wordsworthian revolt; and after a lapse of more than a century it was another north-countryman who revived the attempt. Gibson, inspired by the Northumbrian fells and the simple life

¹ *Lyrical Ballads*, Preface to 1800 ed.

he found there, turned his back on the luxuriant romance and sophistication of nineteenth-century tradition and went back to the same sources as had enriched Wordsworth in his lakeland life. As he put it in the forefront of *Daily Bread* (1908):

Lured onward by that happy singing-flight,
I caught the stormy summons of the sea
Through whose unresting conflict day and night
Surges the dauntless human harmony.

And thence the inspiration passed to this simple American and led him back to the lode of New England rural life. It is a hard, even stern, life; but it has its qualities of beauty. Frost's poetry is often tragic, but it is irradiated by the hopes and loves of common folk and is lit up at times by a quiet, playful humour. Although his art is rooted in the same principles and made of the same kind of stuff as English poetry it is essentially American. It transcends nationalist confines in so far as it deals with the human qualities which are bounded within no political frontiers.

None of these modern American poets had wandered far from the sources and modes of traditional English poetry. Whitman had tried to display the meanings of the noisy turmoil of American life which rattled over the prairie and roared in the cities. These others were quieter souls, discriminating, criticizing at times, but standing aside from the mad swirl of American life. Into it, with the thrust of a Viking's prow, rushed Carl Sandburg. This son of a Swedish settler in the Middle West had a rough schooling. Of formal education he had little. Out on the plains of Illinois he had been driving a team at thirteen. Then he had wandered to the city and in turn was porter in a barber's shop, theatrical

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scene-shifter, truck-man, potter, dishwasher in an hotel, back again to the fields as a harvester, and away into the world as soldier in the Spanish War. Finally he went to college and after a further varied life became a journalist.

With this teeming experience behind him he began publishing some verse in *Poetry* in 1914. He was awarded a prize for *Chicago*, in which he sings in Whitmanesque mood and style a song of the Windy City, the brutal, strong, vital, laughing capital of the Middle West—

Hog Butcher for the World, Tool Maker, Stacker of
Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight
Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders.

For all its crudity and its wickedness and its coarseness, he loves Chicago for its life and its laughter, laughing as a young man laughs.

Laughing!

Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of
Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to be the Hog
Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player
with Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation.

This was reprinted in the forefront of *Chicago Poems* which appeared in 1916. Varying in form from delicate lyric to booming rhythmical prose they reflect his impressions of this pulsing city full of noise and cruelty and pathos and strong life. In a later work he declares

First I would like to write for you a poem to be shouted
in the teeth of a strong wind.

Chicago Poems shows this vaunting mood. These poems are loud, seething, energetic. Sandburg flames with the

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pride of life and the anger of revolt, and burns with indignation ; but this giant can also glow with the gentler warmth of sympathy as he looks on the quiet sorrow and pathetic insufficiency of life in this boiling city. In the street-car at seven o'clock in the morning he looks into the tired souls of these helots returning to their work.

Try with your pencils for these crooked faces,
That pig-sticker in one corner—his mouth—
That overall factory girl—her loose cheeks.

Find for your pencils
A way to mark your memory
Of tired empty faces.

After their night's sleep,
In the moist dawn
At cool daybreak,
Faces
Tired of wishes,
Empty of dreams.

(Halsted Street Car.)

And he weeps to see the drudges whose lives are drained away into the merciless machine of industry. He sees the crowd of them going into the mill-doors.

You never come back,
I say good-by when I see you going in the doors,
The hopeless open doors that call and wait
And take you then for—how many cents a day?
How many cents a day for the sleepy eyes and fingers?

I say good-by because I know they tap your wrists,
In the dark, in the silence, day by day,
And all the blood of you drop by drop,
And you are old before you are young.
You never come back.

(Mill-doors.)

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But the most tragic element of this sacrifice of life is the casting of children into the maw of Moloch.

Of my city the worst that men will ever say is this:
You took little children away from the sun and the dew,
And the glimmers that played in the grass under the great
sky,
And the reckless rain; you put them between walls
To work, broken and smothered, for bread and wages,
To eat dust in their throats and die empty-hearted
For a little handful of pay on a few Saturday nights.
(*They Will Say.*)

Himself a man of boisterous vitality, he feels the tragedy of the inertness that characterizes the millions of the masses. It is pathetic but natural that eventually the grasshopper shall become a burden and desire shall fail; but it is awful to contemplate the masses that never have desire. For millions life is always tired and without desire.

Sandburg knew and sang the sunshine and the zero mornings of the prairie in his Illinois farmlands, the hard work of the ploughman and the cornhusker. But even in *Cornhuskers* (1918), in which the countryman in Sandburg shows most strongly, he cannot forget the noise and blare of the city, the rattle of the railway-train and the sleek speed of a motor-car. If it is not the masses that occupy him it is only because in the country the toilers are still persons. It is of them he thinks, much as Millet of his eternal peasant. Scant as may be the life of the country worker, his soul has not been utterly pounded into the shapeless lump of city humanity.

Sandburg had looked upon the masses and his spiritual conversion was the becoming aware of what they were and what they might be. One day Wilfrid Gibson, so he tells us, was converted. He had sung in the Victorian

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mode of pretty things in pretty ways until one day he got a sight of the common man. Then he gave us *Daily Bread*, and that long series of dramatic pictures of common folk. So Sandburg: he had looked on the sights and heard the sounds of life among the mountains and on the beach, under the stars and at high noon; he had felt the thrill of the doings of great men in the pageantry of war and in the vast tasks of industry, and the love of a mother for her child—

And then one day I got a true look at the Poor,
millions of the Poor, patient and toiling; more
patient than crags, tides and stars; innumerable,
patient as the darkness of night—and all broken,
humble ruins of nations.

(*Masses.*)

Like Moody, he sees the horrible tyranny of the industrial machine over these patient masses, and like him he is conscious that man might control the machine and make it his servant. He loves the strong, efficient and beautiful machine, and the things it can make. He is always a mystic, and like Kipling's McAndrew, the first great hymnist of the beauty of modern machinery, he looks into its soul and sees it a lovely thing if not perverted to a tyrant's ends. His aim is to carry sensation into the midst of the objects of science itself. But he never sees them as mere physical objects. The motor-car is the medium through which the driver expresses his love of speed. It is a lovely, lean, swift thing, but it is a vehicle of human passion.

Danny the driver dreams of it when he sees women
in red skirts and red sox in his sleep.
It is in Danny's life and runs in the blood of him . . .
a lean gray-ghost car.

(*Portrait of a Motor Car.*)

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Even the smoke and dirt of the steel towns are epic. Smirching and devouring men they are nevertheless an expression of the life that sways in this teeming Middle West.

A bar of steel—it is only
Smoke at the heart of it, smoke and the blood of a man.
A runner of fire ran in it, ran out, ran somewhere else,
And left—smoke and the blood of a man
And the finished steel, chilled and blue.
So fire runs in, runs out, runs somewhere else again
And the bar of steel is a gun, a wheel, a nail, a shovel,
A rudder under the sea, a steering-gear in the sky;
And always dark in the heart and through it,
Smoke and the blood of a man.
Pittsburg, Youngstown, Gary—they make their steel
with men.

(Smoke and Steel.)

Chaotic in temperament, Sandburg is chaotic in form. Although he can sing the limpid notes of lyric he is more characteristic in the stormy measures of rhythmical prose. He moves with the swinging gait of some primordial giant, shouting lustily a song that out-tops even the roar of his noisy America and carries over its vast plains. This giant can be moved to huge anger, but it is an anger rooted in love. Like Whitman he hugs the great human mass, like Rupert Brooke he lingers affectionately over the small common things of life. "I am a pal of the world," he shouts. And in his access of love he seeks to identify himself with the throbbing life of man in closest communion. He loves the commonplace mass and the objects of the work of human hands. No poem expresses more clearly this mystical love than *Skyscraper*, in which he sees the colossus as a mass of steel and masonry, but also as a place where thousands of men and women, boys and girls pour in for their daily lives. They give the

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building "a soul of dreams and thoughts and memories." The caissons reach down holding it to the rock of a turning planet, the girders hold together its walls and floors as they tower to the sky. In it are the men and the women, the boys and the girls; in it is the work of the men who planned and built it. It has a soul. At night they all pour out and it is empty and silent; but the soul is there.

Darkness on the hallways. Voices echo. Silence holds.
... Watchmen walk slow from floor to floor and try
the doors. Revolvers bulge from their hip pockets.
... Steel safes stand in corners. Money is stacked
in them.

A young watchman leans at a window and sees the
lights of barges butting their way across a harbor,
nets of red and white lanterns in a railroad yard,
and a span of glooms splashed with lines of white
and blurs of crosses and clusters over the sleeping
city.

By night the skyscraper looms in the smoke and the
stars and has a soul.

The whole man is in that poem and it is interesting to know that it was written by the young journalist on a scrap of newsprint paper in pencil one day when waiting for a trial in a Juvenile Court in Chicago. The dominating sympathy and the mysticism are both there. But it is *Prayers of Steel* in which the desire of identification rises to an impassioned cry.

Lay me on an anvil, O God.
Beat me and hammer me into a crowbar.
Let me pry loose old walls.
Let me lift and loosen old foundations.

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Lay me on an anvil, O God.
Beat me and hammer me into a steel spike.
Drive me into the girders that hold a skyscraper
together.
Take red-hot rivets and fasten me into the central
girders.
Let me be the great nail holding a skyscraper through
blue nights into white stars.

Sandburg told me that most of his deeper life in his early years is in this poem: the consuming zeal of the iconoclast and the burning passion to build a beautiful world. He wants the world of man to be as grand as the face of nature.

I was born on the prairie and the milk of its wheat,
the red of its clover, the eyes of its women, gave me
a song and a slogan.

(Prairie.)

He is a brother of the cornhuskers who live and work and love and hate in the great prairie lying between the shed of the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians, prairies that were before and will be after the towns. Sandburg is essentially a peasant, and the cruel, dirty town shocks him, but his colossal optimism can see through and beyond the horrors of the town to a fair city worthy of man.

Not even a cursory sketch of American poetry in the earlier decades of the century can ignore Vachell Lindsay's work. Brought up in the rather prim surroundings of a comfortable middle-western town, not unimportant, especially in its own eyes—Springfield, Illinois, which is not likely ever to forget that Abraham Lincoln was its citizen. Bred in a state of reasonable plenty, he made contact with conventional culture from early life, and sometimes with its more unconventional

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forms. His mother was artistically a little wayward by Main Street standards, to judge from his own accounts. The stern religious fibre of nineteenth-century America is the substance of his philosophical and moral texture, but through it glows the light of an almost Blakeian mysticism. If Blake had lived in the Middle West he might have written,

I saw wild downs and bowers
And smoking incense towers
And mad exotic flowers
In Illinois,
Where ragged ditches ran
Now springs of Heaven began
Celestial drink for man
In Illinois.

(*The Angel and the Clown.*)

Lindsay was a man of intensely religious nature; living in a noisy world which shocked and delighted him. Like Whitman and Sandburg he must go shouting into the face of this windy American scene, yelling plangent songs and chanting rocking rhythms. He is conscious of these two moods, which seem so strangely contrasting. He knows he is a rowdy fellow, and he is half-proud of, half-apologetic for, his volcanic outbursts. In *An Apology for the Bottle Volcanic* he explains how when he dips his pen into that bottle he finds it full of fire, and

The salamanders flying forth I cannot but admire.
It's Etna, or Vesuvius.

The little demons have

seized my pen for hobby-horse as witches ride a
broom,
And left a trail of brimstone words and blots and gobs
of gloom.

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At other times the bottle holds only ink and he no longer steams and shouts.

And yet when I am extra good and say my prayers at
night,
And mind my ma, and do the chores, and speak to
folks polite,
My bottle spreads a rainbow-mist and from the vapor
fine
Ten thousand troops from fairyland come riding in a
line.

These two moods are always struggling for the mastery, or at least riding the poet's imagination alternately in fiery gallop or in delicate amble. But it is the lusty cantor of America who is especially interesting. He can sing sweetly, as other lyrists have—

Our Sweetheart, Spring, came softly,
Her gliding hands were fire,
Her lilac breath upon our cheeks
Consumed us with desire.

It is pretty embroidery ; but many can stitch as daintily. Not many can swirl us down the wind with tornado force as in *The Congo* or *Daniel* or *General William Booth Enters into Heaven*. Here his verse at once simple and wild swings us along with terrific rhythms matching the force of grand passions.

Lindsay was essentially a minstrel. He actually tramped America, singing for his supper. Fired with the desire for beauty and the passion for reforming the world, he went out chanting his poetic evangel to the people where they were. He believed that the poet should publish his art with his own voice as the minstrels did, and this evangelist-troubadour tried by the incantation of his verse to sweeten the crude, coarse America that

he loved so well. And so he went forth on what he has called his mendicant preaching tours.

His religion, though rooted in the rigorous puritanism amid which he had been reared, was simplified and fortified by the childlike faith and unsophisticated imagination which stamp the religion of the darkie. Much of his religious poetry is characterized by that infant innocence and grand incongruity with which we are familiar in the negro spiritual and *par excellence* in Connely's *Green Pastures*. He can depict with the sympathy of Wordsworth or Robert Frost the mood of the Proud Farmer of Indiana :

He read by night, he built his world by day.
The farm and house of God to him were one.
For forty years he preached and plowed and wrought—
A statesman in the field, who bent to none.

His plowman neighbors were as lords to him.
His was an ironside, democratic pride.
He served a rigid Christ, but served him well—
And, for a lifetime, saved the countryside.

(*A Gospel of Beauty.*)

But this secure Christian would have been shocked by the primitive theology and enthusiastic, almost orgiastic, chant to the tune of "The Blood of the Lamb" which introduces General Booth to Heaven. The bass drum is beaten loudly as the General enters, and the banjos shriek as all his slum followers join in the triumphal entry. Booth is still the chief with eagle countenance,

Beard a-flying, air of high command
Unabated in that holy land.

And then to sweet flute music

Jesus came from out the court-house door,
Stretched his hands above the passing poor.

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At last the Grand Chorus breaks, to the clatter of tambourines "Jing-jing-jingled in the hands of Queens," and the aquiline General is suddenly aware amid the flag-filled air that his Master has come to welcome him.

Christ came gently with a robe and crown
For Booth the soldier, while the throng knelt down.
He saw King Jesus. They were face to face,
And he knelt a-weeping in that holy place.
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

The crudity of it might seem blasphemous to the Proud Farmer, but in Dixie it would lift up the heart and irradiate simple souls.

It is partly the simplicity of this religious outlook that attracts Lindsay, but its noise appeals to him also. *Daniel* is full of rattle and swing. Daniel himself, among his many chores as general handyman about the house of Darius, "stirred up the jazz in the palace band." The lions roar, and the audience is enjoined to unite with the reciter in outroaring them. But Daniel is unmoved by any noise or threat of beast, and when the Lord sends Gabriel down to chain these ravenous, roaring creatures, Darius sees that Daniel is a Christian child, "And gave him his job again." And so this exciting and improving tale ends happily, and a good time is had by all.

The deepest and grimmest reading of the negro heart is in *The Congo*. We see the primitive blood-lust of the savage breaking through the coating of civilization as drink loosens the restraints; and then creep up the primeval fears which haunt the African forest and linger in the memory of the black race. There follows a mood of irrepressible high spirits and the jubilation of the American negro takes us back to scenes of tribal revelry where even the witch-men laughed. And finally the same

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enthusiasm inspires the good old black evangelist preaching salvation with thumpings on his Bible and revivalist shoutings, until the congregation, convicted of sin and filled with the divine afflatus, see visions and stand on chairs,

And slammed with their hymn books till they shook
the room
With "glory, glory, glory"
And "Boom, boom, Boom."

Again the primeval spirit of the black man has expressed itself, but purged now of the grosser superstition and fear which held him in thrall by the creeping Congo.

And so Lindsay alternates, dipping his pen now into the ink-bottle, now into the volcano. Now he sings a dainty lyric for a pretty child, or weaves a word-sampler of respectable Illinois; anon he is chanting the noise of this vast America or ranting poetically with a God-intoxicated nigger. He is certainly a curious phenomenon, but characteristic of his day—humanitarian, sociologist, revivalist and minstrel. His energy is terrific: he describes himself as

Shaking window-pane and door
With a crashing cosmic tune,
With the war-cry of the spheres,
Rhythm of the roar of noon,
Rhythm of Niagara's roar,
Voicing planet, star and moon,
SHRIEKING of the better years.
Prophet-singers will arise,
Prophets coming after me,
Sing my song in softer guise
With more delicate surprise;
I am but the pioneer
Voice of the Democracy;

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I am the gutter dream,
I am the golden dream,
Singing science, singing steam.

(*The Kallyope Yell.*)

Lindsay was one of several pioneer poets of new America who is so proud of her democracy and of her engines. Young America is fresh and untrammelled by many of the conventions which inhibit the older, more settled peoples of the Old World. She is still full of wonder and enthusiasm. Americans are not afraid to ask questions or to relish their own achievements: an Englishman is always careful to seem to be above both these weaknesses.

Whitman saw this New America and prophetically he heard America singing. These other poets have continued to fashion that song and in so doing they are discovering the soul of New America; perhaps they are helping to make the New America—with Chicago, not Boston, as its seat of culture and its spiritual capital. They are a noisy lot, some of these new American poets of democracy and steam—ranting, roaring Willies, whose song must be loud if it is to be audible across the prairie or above the din of life in the Windy City.

After the first Great War John Gould Fletcher wrote: "The War has had the effect of making Americans realize that they are something essentially different, in spite of the accident of a similar language, from the English; and in spite of the accident of immigration, from the European stocks. America is now engaged in the process of discovering itself. The process is not yet completed, nor has it gone on long enough to enable us with any confidence to predict what the future America may produce. We can only say that the battle for a new America is being fought out most fiercely, in the field of

poetry.” Another American critic may be allowed to say the last word of this chapter of American poetry. Miss Widdemer wrote in *Young Idea* of American literature, and it is especially true of American poetry: “It’s going to be a big thing, I believe, but, like America itself, it is as yet chaotic, a grand, but unwieldy thing. It isn’t a whole so far. But I know it will be.”

